Vatican
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Pope Francis leaves his studios window at the end of the Angelus noon prayer in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Sunday, Nov. 5, 2023. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

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Rome — November 6, 2023

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Pope Francis met with European rabbis on Nov. 6 and decried antisemitism, war and terrorism in a written speech he declined to read, saying he wasn't feeling well.

Francis told the rabbis during the audience in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace that he was very happy to receive them, but added: "I'm not feeling well, and so I prefer not to read the speech but give it to you, so you can take it with you."

Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said the pope "has a bit of a cold and a long day of audiences.'' The 86-year-old pontiff "preferred to greet the European rabbis individually, and that's why he handed over his speech."

He said the pope’s activities are proceeding regularly for the rest of the day. On the pope's schedule was a late afternoon encounter with some 7,000 children from 84 countries.

In his prepared speech to the rabbis, Francis said his first thought and prayers goes "above all else, to everything that has happened in the last few weeks," a clear reference to the Oct. 7 Hamas attack in Israel, including the taking away of hostages to the Gaza Strip, and the ensuing Israeli-Hamas war.

"Yet again violence and war have erupted in that Land blessed by the Most High, which seems continually assailed by the vileness of hatred and the deadly clash of weapons," Francis wrote in the speech.

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With France, Austria and Italy among the countries in Europe recently seeing a spate of antisemitic vandalism and slogans, Francis added: "The spread of antisemitic demonstrations, which I strongly condemn, is also of great concern."

The pontiff said believers in God are called to build "fraternity and open paths of reconciliation for all."

"Not weapons, not terrorism, not war, but compassion, justice and dialogue are the fitting means for building peace,'' Francis said in the speech.

The pontiff also advocated taking steps to "search for our neighbor" as well as acceptance and patience, and certainly not "the brusque passion of vengeance and the folly of bitter hatred."

Francis in recent years has dealt with several health setbacks, including two abdominal surgeries and a chronic knee problem that forces him to use a wheelchair when walking longer stretches. Earlier this year, Francis was hospitalized for treatment of what the Vatican said was bronchitis, but the pontiff described as a bout of pneumonia.

Just a few days ago, in an interview with Italian state TV, Francis was asked about his health. The pope replied with one of his frequent lines: "I'm still alive, you know" and also said he was going to Dubai in early December for the COP28 conference on combating climate change.